

Never Quite Knowing - Self as a Natural Centre of Circulation

By Alan Rayner

Never Quite Knowing

Life is a creative exploration of renewing possibility,

Not a competitive struggle for permanent existence –

Poetry, not Prose

Improvisation, not Prescription,

Tolerance, not Rigidity,

A Search for Openings, not Quest for Completion

Motion in Stillness, Stillness in Motion,

Responsiveness in Receptivity, Receptivity in Responsiveness,

Energy in Space, Space in Energy,

Not One or Other Alone,

No matter without no matter

Never Quite Knowing

What's coming next,

Preparing for Surprise,

Ready to change One's mind,

One's direction

That's the evolutionary learning curve

In natural inclusion –

Truly natural Science,

Truly natural Art

Exploring natural neighbourhood with Love

Exciting and Inspiring

Isn't It?

22nd October 2015, with appreciation of Emily Dickinson, 'I Dwell in Possibility'

How do you perceive the life of your Self in relation to Nature? Have you ever walked down the same path twice? Is every day, every encounter you make along your way through life exactly the same to you? If not, do you notice what differs, what changes, what to expect, what not to expect and what it all means to you?

When I was very young, I was wordlessly aware of my Self and other's Selves as natural centres of circulation, like eddies in a flowing current journeying to who knows quite where. I have retained that awareness throughout my life. The only difference today is that I can try to describe it in words – and each attempt I make is different, in its own way, sometimes subtly, sometimes hugely.

Back then, as the *recipient* of others' and mother's care, I simply *felt* my Self to be a hollow interior within an energetic bodily envelope within endless space, craving a supply of food, water, warmth, softness and firmness from all surrounding me to keep me content. I knew the discomfort of being deprived of this supply, and like all human infants had an ear-piercing way of bringing this to others' notice.

Then, one day, sitting with my mother amongst a circle of variably coloured, shaven or unshaven, turbaned or bare-headed visitors she had invited into our lounge for political discussion (my mother was a member of Nairobi City Council in the 1950s), I was startled by a powerful realization. Not only was I the embodied focal point of other characters circulating around me, but so too was each of those characters. We were each included in others' circulation within and around endless space. We were each both providers and recipients of regard for and from others. We were all inhabitants of each other's spatial and temporal neighbourhood, whose welfare depended utterly on how we regarded and hence treated one another.

When, in later life, I was told of Jesus's invitation to 'love your neighbour *as you love your Self*', it made immediate, obvious, natural sense to me. In my case, however, this invitation came to apply not only to my human neighbours, but to all inhabitants of my natural neighbourhood and thence to my natural neighbourhood – Nature – itself, as an endless presence everywhere. I became a devoted naturalist, dedicated to my life's work in *ecology*. Ultimately, ecology in its deepest, widest, most natural sense is the study of pattern, process and relationship at all scales of organization, from subatomic to galactic. But at least to begin with, I focused my attention primarily at the scale of earthly ecosystems and communities.

So, when, in my adult working life I sought to understand a living organism, population or community, my approach was always to try to gain a feeling for it by actually and imaginatively immersing my Self, as a centre of circulation, within its circulation. I would study it *empathically*, as a

receptive and involved participant, within the context of its natural neighbourhood, as an energetic inhabitant and expression of its habitat. Eventually this approach would yield a deeply felt, intuitive and aesthetic appreciation of my subject of study, which included while surpassing all which could be gathered from distanced analytical observation alone. As an illustration, my years spent studying the relationship between trees and fungi in forest and woodland ecosystems led me to prepare the following painting and description of 'Fountains of the Forest':



"A tree is a solar powered fountain, its sprays supplied through wood-lined conduits and sealed in by bark until their final outburst in leaves... Within and upon its branching, enfolding, water-containing surfaces, and reaching out from there into air and soil are branching, enfolding, water-containing surfaces of finer scale, the mycelial networks of fungi... which provide a communications interface for energy transfer from neighbour to neighbour, from living to dead, and from dead to living" – Alan Rayner, Presidential Address, British Mycological Society, December 1998

Today I took a walk with my wife, Marion, through woodlands close to our home in search of fungi for a public display. We're quite good at finding fungi, due to our long experience of knowing how to look (both from a distance and close to hand), where to look, where not to look, what to look for and why we find it where we do. But we're always prepared to be surprised.

We took the same walk last week, also in search of fungi, but for a different display. The first thing we noticed this time, as we trod the familiar path, was that large numbers of leaves had fallen onto it and all around it, obscuring what had been easily visible the week before. We were going to have to adjust our search pattern to take account of this new situation: we were going to have to turn over some old, newly fallen leaves! In fact we collected some of these leaves to show, because since last week they had yellowed, making the ‘tarry spots’ and ‘green islands’ where *Rhytisma acerinum* and *Uncinula bicornis* were growing all the more strikingly visible. What had previously been more visible was now obscured by what was now more visible!

We approached a middle-aged ash tree around whose base, last week, a crowd of Shaggy Scalycaps had fired up the shaded path-side. Oh good! Still here! If a little older, worse for wear. But still good enough to gather a few fading specimens into my basket. On we wandered, turning aside leaves, turning over logs and branches, and gradually my basket filled.

Then on to a different woodland, a different path, where last week we’d found crowds of Giant Fairy Clubs (for hitting giant fairies with, I like to joke). We searched and searched until at last, Marion said, ‘here they are, but not as we expected to find them!’ And, indeed, there they were, a crowd of stiff little fingers protruding from the leaf litter. But, unlike last time, when their pale buff colour showed up so clearly, they had turned dark brown – almost invisible, not good enough for show.

Disappointed, we had one more ‘star attraction’ that we had hoped to find. ‘We won’t see it underneath all these leaves’, Marion said. And, just at that moment, we did, striking us dumb with awe.



Sessile Earth Star (*Geastrum fimbriatum*), photographed by Marion Rayner

To return to the path of my working life, I gradually became aware that few, if any, of my scientific peers – or indeed anyone else – shared or understood my approach and the insights it gave rise to. What seemed so obvious to me was apparently not at all obvious to others – and indeed was disregarded and even resented by them. I became aware that, in some *crucial* way, the way in which I perceived my Self and others' Selves as centres of each other's circulation in and as dynamic inclusions of Nature, was NOT how most other people perceived their Selves in relation to their natural neighbourhood. I became aware that the way I intuitively regard and treat my natural neighbourhood is not how I or others have been instructed to do so, as distanced observers isolated by some mental barrier from personal involvement in what we are observing. I was not, for example, following Charles Darwin's restrictive code of scientific praxis:-

"A scientific man ought to have no wishes, no affections, - a mere heart of stone."

Consequently, I did not envisage biological evolution to occur by 'natural selection – or the preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life', but instead understand it to arise through a process of 'natural inclusion' – the co-creative, fluid-dynamic transformation of all through all in receptive spatial context'. I recognise that Nature evolves as a continuous current, including and transforming what's possible, *not* as a definitive judge exterminating what isn't possible. This led me to develop a philosophy ('natural inclusionality') of natural inclusion based on awareness of all tangible natural occurrences as mutual inclusions of receptive space and informative energy'. Just like me as a baby – a needful energetic bundling of energy around a receptive, hollow interior, within endless space.

The starting place for understanding natural inclusion is *within* Nature, not as an abstracted observer of Nature. By 'Nature', here, I mean 'Everywhere'. We seek to understand and relate to everywhere (NB not just 'everything') and to recognize our human place as a dynamic locality within everywhere. We do not abstract ourselves or anything else from what we are dynamic inclusions of. This brings about a CRUCIAL change of perception from that associated with mentally abstracting ourselves and other localities from what naturally includes us. That change of perception incorporates our bodily feelings of being dynamically included in Nature as well as our more distant and objective observations (broadly sensed) of what is within and around us and others.

With that change of perception, we readily recognize the limitations of world views that are based on distant and objective observations alone. We realize the misconceptions and abuses that these can give rise to, such as abstract notions of hierarchical power and definitive boundaries that exclude any consideration of space and its vital role in life. We recognize instead the creative possibilities for living in a loving, naturally sustainable way, as did Emily Dickinson, who dwelled in possibility everywhere.